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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 002508

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, INR-B

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SUBJECT: (C) KUWAITI AMBASSADOR TO TEHRAN: IRAN FEARS

SANCTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

This cable contains biographical information. Please see para. 9.

¶1. (C) Summary: During a June 4 meeting with Poloff and PolMiloff, Kuwaiti Ambassador to Iran Majdi Al-Thufiri shared his thoughts on the June 12 election, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei's ability to control Iran's security forces, the U.S.-Iranian relationship and Iran's concerns over the poor state of its economy. Al-Thufiri said Iran's leaders think it unlikely that the U.S. will take military action against the country, but fear the potential impact of economic sanctions. Echoing the sentiments of other Kuwaitis, Al-Thufiri predicted that Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would handily win the elections, as it is widely recognized that he alone is capable of enacting much needed economic reforms. Finally, Al-Thufiri shared details of a January 2003 meeting during which Iranian FM Kamal Kharazi made comments indicating Iranian ability to assess U.S. military strength may have been very poor. End Summary.

Rafsanjani "Only Choice" in Elections

¶2. (C) Taking time out of a four-day visit to Kuwait to speak with Poloff and PolMiloff, Kuwaiti Ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Iran, Majdi Al-Thufiri said June 4 that former President Rafsanjani was by far the most popular candidate of those running for President in Iran. He said Rafsanjani was the "only choice" for those who had hopes of reforming the economy because he is the one candidate powerful enough to influence Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Contradicting reports that Rafsanjani and Khamenei do not get along, Al-Thufiri said Rafsanjani was Khamenei's "favorite" and that Khamenei had thrown his support fully behind him. Al-Thufiri said Khamenei is concerned that low voter turnout during the June 12 elections would harm the legitimacy of the elections in the eyes of world opinion, and was therefore going to great lengths to support candidates -- like Rafsanjani -- whom he believed would turn out large numbers of voters.

¶3. (C) Al-Thufiri said that if elected, Rafsanjani could be expected to open Iran's economy to further foreign investment, but would have to work very hard to do so. Describing the Iranian political system as akin to the "North Korean model," he said control was very centralized in the upper echelons, but that each region had its own powerful leaders and interests.

Supreme Leader May Not Control Security Forces

¶4. (C) Responding to a question from PolMiloff, Al-Thufiri said it was not clear that Supreme Leader Khamenei would be able to control Iran's security forces in the event of a serious political crisis. He said the combination of unclear lines of command and the current religious debate inside Qom as to the viability of Velayat e Faqih would be complicating factors in the event of a crisis. Asked if it was likely the regime might counter future unrest with a Basij-led crackdown, as it had in 1999, Al-Thufiri said no.

Regime Will "Do Anything" to Keep Power, Fears Sanctions

¶5. (C) Al-Thufiri said that hardliners in the Iranian establishment "would do anything" to maintain their power, and are acutely aware that the poor state of Iran's economy was its main weakness. He said that although Iran was uncomfortable with a U.S. military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan, it does not view a U.S. strike on Iranian territory as likely, and it dismisses the chances of success should any strike target Iran's dispersed nuclear facilities. Rather, he said, Iran fears that further economic sanctions could produce a popular backlash large enough to topple the regime.

¶6. (C) Noting Iran's involvement in Iraq, Al-Thufiri said that Iran's policies in Iraq had counterbalanced those of Syria, on which he said Iran had applied (unspecified) pressure to patrol its borders with Iraq more effectively.

17. (C) Regarding the Kuwaiti-Iranian bilateral relationship, Al-Thufiri said he had advised Kuwaiti Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah to be frank in his dealings with Iran in order to win the country's respect. Revealing details of a January 10, 2003 meeting between Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazzi and PM Shaykh Sabah, he said that the Iranian FM had told PM Sabah that Iran estimated that U.S. forces in Kuwait numbered 40,000 at that time and asked if this was correct. PM Sabah had responded bluntly that the number was 100,000 too low and added that there were plans for another 40,000 British troops.

Kuwaiti Concern Over Possible Iranian Nukes

18. (C) Al-Thufiri said that Kuwait is "very, very concerned" about the possibility that Iran might develop nuclear weapons, as it could potentially set off a nuclear arms race in the region, eventually culminating in a nuclear armed Iraq that could someday again threaten Kuwaiti sovereignty.

Biographical Note

19. (C) Al-Thufiri is a Sunni who has served as Kuwait's Ambassador to Iran since 2001. Although he does not speak Farsi, he is known to be close to high-level leaders in Iran, and post has no reason to doubt his claims that he frequently sits with former President and presidential candidate Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Al-Thufiri appears to be in his mid-forties and speaks English fluently.

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